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ABSTRACT

This paper reports preliminary findings from a 1988 Hampshire (England) schools research project in which primary and secondary school teachers with special responsibility for language teaching were interviewed to discover their views on the place of explicit knowledge about language (KAL) in the school language curriculum and on possible rationales and strategies for developing such knowledge. An hour-long discussion with seven secondary chairpersons (Heads) of English and a similar number of chairpersons of Modern Languages reviewed their aims in teaching language and the place within these aims of the development of explicit KAL; goals and strategies for teaching particular age groups were also reviewed. English teachers were found to be much less aware of the "language awareness" movement than Modern Language teachers. English teachers showed more concern for sociolinguistic aspects of language than Modern Language teachers. Missing from the discussions in both groups were key topics in contemporary expert models of language, such as the structure of discourse beyond the level of the individual sentence, the spoken language in all its aspects, and first/second language acquisition and development. Findings demonstrate the limited conscious commitment by ordinary language teachers to the systematic development of pupils' KAL. (Contains 15 references.) (NAV)

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Teachers' Views of Language Knowledge

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TEACHERS' VIEWS OF LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE

Rosamond Mitchell and Janet Hooper

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports some preliminary findings from a research project conducted in Hampshire schools in Autumn 1988, in which primary and secondary school teachers with special responsibility for language teaching were interviewed to discover their views on the place of explicit knowledge about language (KAL) in the school language curriculum, and on possible rationales and strategies for developing such knowledge.

The project took its immediate stimulus from the publication of the Kingman Report (DES 1988a), which argued the case for such teaching at least partly on the grounds that children's language proficiency would thereby be improved. This connection between the development of children's explicit understanding of language as a system and that of their practical language skills is controversial, and disputed in much contemporary writing by English mother tongue specialists (e.g. Allen 1988, Barr 1988), as well as among some second language acquisition researchers (e.g. Krashen 1981). On the other hand, the 'Language Awareness' movement in British schools has, in the 1980s, been promoting the development of children's explicit language knowledge on other broader grounds and asserts its value regardless of any direct impact on language skills (Hawkins 1984, Donmall 1985).

However, the knowledge and beliefs of practising classroom teachers on the issue have been explored only to a very limited extent. Brumfit and Mitchell (forthcoming) and Dennison (1989) have explored the personal knowledge about language of student teachers, using a structured questionnaire first developed by Bloor for use with language undergraduate students (1986). Mitchell (1988) documented a continuing commitment to grammar explanations among MLs teachers in Scotland involved in communicative language teaching initiatives in the early 1980s. Chandler (1988) used a postal questionnaire among English teachers to investigate current 'grammar teaching' practices, finding that, while over 80% of his sample claimed to teach "some grammar", explicit knowledge of language appeared to be declining among English teachers themselves, with younger teachers appearing to have "little more than a fragmentary knowledge, even of traditional grammar" (p.22). Despite much polemic in teachers' journals (see review by Stephens 1989), little else is known about ordinary classroom practitioners' beliefs.

The study reported here was designed to explore teachers' knowledge and beliefs more fully, on the assumption that these are key factors which largely determine the manner and degree of implementation of any given language curriculum. The prospects for the proposed National Curriculum for English and Modern Languages (DES 1988b) and, in particular, for the implementation of Kingman-style language awareness work depend critically on a clear understanding of teachers' views.

The research strategy adopted was that of the semi-structed individual interview. An hour-long discussion covered teachers' overall aims in teaching language and the place within these of the development of explicit KAL; goals and strategies for teaching particular age groups were reviewed. Teachers' rationales for KAL were explored and, in particular, their perceptions of its relationship with the development of language proficiency. Further themes to emerge were teachers' own beliefs about the nature of language and continuities/discontinuities between the beliefs and practices of primary and secondary school teachers.

The sample of teachers interviewed was randomly selected, from primary, middle and 11/12–16 schools in the Southampton/Winchester area. In primary and middle schools, language consultants were interviewed; these are class teachers who have undertaken a specialist advisory role on language for their colleagues, but continue to teach the full primary curriculum to their own class. In secondary schools, Heads of English and of Modern Languages were interviewed; as far as practicable, these were chosen in pairs from individual schools, so that the issue of liaison across the 'subject' divide could be explored in more depth.

This paper reports on the views on the KAL issue of seven secondary school Heads of English and a similar number of Heads of Modern Languages, which have so far been analysed in detail. The views of the remaining secondary school teachers, as well as of the primary teachers, will be reported in full elsewhere.

THE ENGLISH TEACHERS

Background and Overall Aims

The English teachers interviewed were hardly aware of the 'Language Awareness' movement as such. If they had heard of it, it was as "something which has come down the Modern Languages side"; curriculum co-operation with Modern Languages staff for language awareness work was virtually non-existent. (Indeed, despite initiatives in several schools which had linked the English and Modern Languages departments together in new 'faculty' structures, little active curriculum co-operation of any kind between language departments was reported.)

The English teachers recalled little of value on language topics in their own initial professional training (with the exception of one, who vividly recalled discussions on class, accent and dialect under Harold Rosen's tutelage at the London Institution of Education). In one or two cases, further qualifications had been undertaken, but, overall, this group of teachers seemed to have little curiosity about language itself. While most seemed to be maintaining active personal interests as far as literature was concerned, few were doing any reading on language (one commented favourably on a recent book by David Crystal, another reported buying but not understanding some contemporary linguistics books).

These English teachers generally reported their over-riding aim as being to produce pupils who were effective communicators, orally and in writing; only one individual argued at this point that children should understand language as a system. The predominant strategic means reported for achieving this aim was the study of literature, though some were working through non-literary themes and projects with at least some age groups, using, for instance, ILEA-produced materials on topics such as "Myself" or "The Island" (a 'castaway' simulation).

In this overall framework of aims and means, the development of knowledge about language was generally seen as a secondary if not a marginal issue. It was noticeable that interview questions regarding the development of KAL were frequently reinterpreted and answered in terms of the development of children's practical language skills.

Conceptualisations of Knowledge about Language

Across all three teacher groups, there was considerable variation of views regarding the usefulness of developing pupils' explicit knowledge about language and the

extent to which this should be done. However, throughout the extended discussions which took place on this topic, certain dimensions of language itself were given much more prominence than others. It appeared that there were some aspects of language which individual teachers were able/willing to discuss with a reasonable degree of fluency, whether favourably or unfavourably, while others were hardly mentioned. The topics which were given prominence in this way varied significantly between the different teacher groups, though there was a considerable degree of consistency within each group. Those topics which were prominent in the English teachers' interviews could be grouped under four headings: Syntax, Language Variation, the Writing System and Literary Analysis.

Syntax: This was, in fact, the dominant interpretation of 'knowledge about language' overall; the English teachers, like the others, constantly tended to redefine KAL in the narrow sense of syntactic knowledge and to express overall positive or negative attitudes accordingly. The construct of 'grammar' was, however, itself analysed as having a range of subcomponents. Thus, the traditional parts of speech were mentioned by all English teachers whose transcripts have been analysed. A clear majority reported that they taught all or some of these explicitly to their pupils, though a minority argued that this was not appropriate. Sentence and/or phrase structure was also mentioned by a clear majority, who all claimed to teach at least some aspects of this topic. Clause analysis was mentioned by a majority, mostly to be repudiated as a subject of study; only one teacher reported that this was taught. Otherwise, one teacher each reported the systematic teaching of English morphology (prefixes etc.) and of vocabulary.

Language Variation: Almost all teachers mentioned variation in styles and genres in the writing of English and perceived a need to discuss these explicitly with their pupils; as far as teaching was concerned, this was the most fully supported KAL topic. A clear majority also mentioned the related topic of 'awareness of audience', though neutrally as between speech and writing. These points were concretised by those teachers who claimed to teach particular types of writing (e.g. diaries, letters, autobiography). Lastly, almost all teachers mentioned variation between standard/non-standard English and their contexts of use, and most felt it right to heighten pupils' awareness of this issue, though with differing degrees of 'normative' emphasis.

The Writing System: Almost all teachers said they explicitly discussed and taught aspects of the punctuation system and paragraphing; a minority mentioned spelling 'rules' and claimed to teach them. One teacher explicitly discussed the alphabet and sound-letter relationships with his pupils.

Literary Analysis: A majority mentioned the traditional 'figures of speech' and claimed to teach these; a minority mentioned poetic forms such as rhyme and metre.

Other KAL topics to emerge, though each was mentioned by one or two teachers only (and not necessarily because they felt it appropriate to teach about them), were: language and the media; language families/the history of language; and "non-verbal aspects" – presumably paralinguistics.

It is arguable that these discussions about kinds of KAL which it was/was not appropriate for pupils to develop in school were tapping at a deeper level the teachers' own personal model of language and that the dimensions outlined above constitute the English teachers' own main ways of construing/conceptualising language itself. Certain features of this particular 'model of language' rate special

comment. Firstly, the 'Syntax' and 'Literary Analysis' components are strikingly traditional and seem to have been affected very little by contemporary developments in linguistic and literary theory. Secondly, it is worth considering what is not included of the topics which figure prominently in the programmatic syllabuses of the Language Awareness movement or, indeed, of the Kingman Report: there is little developed analysis of the spoken language or ways of talking about it; there is no reference to the structure of text above the level of the sentence (apart from the traditional concept of 'paragraphing'); there is nothing at all on language acquisition/development. (This is not to assume that the teachers know nothing about these matters or do not think they are important, but somehow they were defined as 'not relevant' throughout an interview, which repeatedly presented opportunities to identify and give personal views about a range of KAL topics.) On the other hand, English teachers have clearly taken on board the non-traditional ideas of register and stylistic variation in written English and of dialectal variation in the spoken language (traceable presumably to the influence of English educationalists such as James Britton and of sociolinguists such as Labov and Trudgill). In this they contrast very clearly with their Modern Languages colleagues, as will be seen below.

Rationales for Developing Knowledge about Language

In discussing possible rationales for developing children's explicit knowledge about language within the school language curriculum, the English teachers (like all the rest) were preoccupied with its supposed relationship with the development of language proficiency. Generally speaking, when for the time being interpreting KAL in the narrow sense of syntactic knowledge, teachers felt it had a limited role in promoting practical language skills; a considerable number felt that the relationship was actually a negative one, with grammatical analysis getting in the way of skill development. A clear majority of the teachers argued that pupils differed in the extent to which their personal language skills could benefit from metastatement and analysis; the consensus view was that academically able pupils could indeed so benefit, but not the rest. However, when thinking about the 'language variation' dimension of KAL, teachers' views of the relationship with language proficiency development were much more positive and there was a widely held (though not unanimous) belief that explicit discussion of stylistic variation had a direct pay-off in improving children's writing skill.

When asked about other possible rationales for KAL (of kinds advanced within the Language Awareness movement, for example), the English teachers mostly had little to add; two explicitly said there was no other, while the rest advanced a variety of suggestions, on the whole tentatively (that it could help MLs learning or literary appreciation, providing intellectual discipline, was in itself pleasurable). Just one teacher presented a strong and well developed argument for the study of language as an abstract system, as (a) accessible to 90% of pupils and (b) empowering/liberating for the individual language user.

THE MODERN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

Awareness of 'Language Awareness'

It was clear from the sample of transcripts analysed so far that the Modern Language teachers possessed a degree of familiarity with the 'Language Awareness' concept, particularly arising in connection with the name of Eric Hawkins and his initiatives in this field (Hawkins 1984). In addition, the concept had been familiarised through

the Hampshire Modern Languages Skills Development Programme (HMLSDP 1988). Under this scheme a range of French, German and Spanish materials are being piloted in Hampshire secondary schools, including an introductory half-term unit entitled "Language Matters", which falls under the umbrella of Language Awareness (and is taught through the medium of English). Typically then, questioned as to their familiarity with the concept, the MLs teachers interviewed cited topics characteristic of the Hampshire scheme, such as similarities and points of comparison between languages, language families, looking at pronunciation and at different alphabets and scripts, recognition of patterns in language and so on – or else cited Hawkins and, sometimes, the Cambridge University Press series of booklets "Awareness of Language". There was also some familiarity with the Language Awareness concept through new course materials such as "Arc-en-Ciel", which introduces discussion of points of language such as pronunciation, gender, appropriacy and so forth.

Significantly, however, this group of teachers all tended to see such Language Awareness teaching as a luxury, rather than part and parcel of their everyday teaching. It was generally regarded as an adjunct, usually a preliminary one, to the real business of teaching the language and, in the schools where it was practised, was viewed as a four-week or half-term introduction in the first year, rather than a continuing dimension to foreign language learning. Thus, topics dealt with systematically at this stage only rarely cropped up later in the school and then only on a very ad hoc basis. It was generally felt that, though interesting and valid in their own right, such consciousness-raising activities would have to cede precedence to the all-important business of learning to communicate in the target language.

Conceptualisations of Language

On the whole, it would be fair comment that, for the MLs Heads of Department, even more than for their English colleagues, knowledge about language tended to be equated with morpho-syntactic knowledge. In spite of their admitted familiarity with a broader spectrum of topics, as discussed under the 'Language Awareness' umbrella, and in spite of the interviewer's attempts to broaden the scope of the term, when questioned about the place of explicit talk about language in their classrooms, the teachers constantly returned to discussion of grammar. (Most commonly, this was in terms of parts of speech, sentence structure, verb tenses and gender.)

The MLs teachers were, however, somewhat on the defensive regarding their own state of knowledge about language; a question about teachers' own use of reference sources in this area was generally perceived as threatening, with one teacher commenting "a degree in linguistics wouldn't help me very much". Clearly, such knowledge as they did have owed little to their original degree and teacher training courses, where the component of language knowledge was generally deemed very slight (if not non-existent). The general background was a literature-based university degree in a modern language, followed by a PGCE where the main emphasis was on teaching methodology. On the whole, the state of the MLs teachers' knowledge about language was perceived to owe more to their later, personal professional development, to a limited extent through reading and, more significantly, through discussion with colleagues, the advisory service, in-service training and encounters with new materials and methodology. (There were regretful comments from teachers on the relative lack of intellectual challenge and stimulation to be found in schools: "Teaching 12–16 stultifies one's urge to know – it has stifled my natural curiosity" said one. "You don't get too far, you don't get too high" said another.)

The fact that questions probing the extent of teachers' own knowledge about language aroused a degree of suspicion and distrust perhaps itself suggests more regret than was overtly expressed and some perceived need of further knowledge.

MLs Rationales for Developing Explicit KAL

Unlike their more sceptical English mother tongue colleagues, the MLs teachers generally believed that a clear positive relationship existed between explicit knowledge about language and the development of practical language proficiency, as the following quotations make clear:

> "I have not thought it through, I just assumed intuitively that if you are aware of how something works that must help you actually do it and it does for lots of things."

> "Yes, knowledge about language gives the confidence to be able to manipulate it."

> "If they have knowledge, it will improve the range of their language and their ability to adapt language. People NOT aware of how language works may memorise a sentence and re-use it, but people WITH knowledge of how language works could take the sentence, adapt it and use it in another context."

The view is clearly expressed in the last of these quotations, that explicit knowledge about language is required to move beyond phrase-book learning to creative use of the target language (or, in other words, for the internalisation of a generative FL system). This view was generally advanced, despite running counter to much current second language acquisition theory; it closely paralleled the views of the sample of Scottish MLs teachers interviewed previously by Mitchell (1988).

In advancing this view, however, the MLs teachers tended consistently to close down their interpretation of KAL to embrace only (morpho) syntactic knowledge. This was clear from the exemplification consistently given, for the kind of ongoing 'talk about language' which it was felt appropriate to undertake with pupils in the 11–16 age bracket, after broader preliminaries had been completed. It emerged from the teachers' accounts of their day-to-day class teaching that such talk was typically limited to aspects of sentence structure, with verbs and tenses being much mentioned, together with topics like gender and adjectival agreement. Indeed, KAL was frequently translated into classroom teaching, in the form of an inductive approach to grammatical patterns.

As with the English teachers, there emerged a general feeling among the MLs teachers that the importance of developing explicit KAL varied substantially, according to the perceived ability of the pupil:

> "For some children, the less able, I don't think that explicit knowledge is something that will support them too much. But I think, for the brighter ones, it is again an additional tool. If you want really to grow and to go on to further work, then I think you must have a knowledge of it. I know there are some children for whom this is not appropriate."

Almost universally, then, it was felt that, for the 'less able' pupil, talking about language is mystifying and off-putting, and is, therefore, neither appropriate nor helpful. For such pupils, the best approach was seen to involve practising with and learning unanalysed chunks or patterns of language, and the analysis of language

structure was viewed as best ignored, since such pupils were thought not to be capable of applying the knowledge to help them manipulate the language. Conversely, the more able the pupil, the more helpful, indeed necessary, talking about language was perceived.

Implicit in these views, of course, are worrying assumptions about the ultimate level of achievement in a foreign language which is seen as possible for the 'less able'. If explicit knowledge of syntax is essential for developing a generative target language competence – and yet some pupils are not capable of acquiring such knowledge – the expectation is created that the most such pupils can achieve (at least in school contexts) is an accumulation of global phrases. In this way, the MLs teachers' commitment to a particular view of KAL can be seen as actually limiting rather than enhancing pupils' ultimate target language proficiency.

As with English teachers, the MLs teachers' rationales for developing pupils' knowledge about language, other than the perceived positive relationship with FL achievement, were fragmentary and undeveloped. Suggestions made by individuals included: "... reduction of insularity", "enrichment of them as people ... and academic interest", "being more aware of other people, perhaps in their difficulties in expressing themselves in language". But such ideas were clearly marginal by comparison with the perceived link with language proficiency.

CONCLUSION

These two key groups of language curriculum specialists had entered teaching with little or no specialist training in language itself. The models of language they themselves controlled could thus be explained primarily as a combination of that transmitted in their own time as school pupils, plus newer ideas internalised during their active professional life via new curricula and materials, in-service activity and informal contacts of all kinds.

These processes evidently continue to operate somewhat differently in the English and MLs traditions. Both groups of teachers shared a strong tendency to equate KAL with morpho-syntactic knowledge of a traditional kind and centring on the written language system. However, attitudes towards the place of such knowledge in the curriculum differed significantly between the two groups. Generally speaking, the English teachers were sceptical of its value as far as developing practical language skills were concerned, for many pupils, and saw little other point in it. The MLs group, however, retained a surprisingly strong consensus that KAL in this narrow sense did contribute vitally to language learning, at least for some pupils.

On the other hand, the English teachers' view of language had other fairly well developed, non-traditional aspects, notably their concern with and ability to analyse language variation. This sociolinguistic dimension was largely absent from the MLs discussion, rather surprisingly, given the promotion of the concept of 'communicative competence' in relevant theoretical literature over the last decade at least (see e.g. Canale and Swain 1980).

Missing from the discussion of both groups, however, were some key topics in contemporary 'expert' models of language (the Kingman model, for example); notably, the structure of discourse beyond the level of the individual sentence, the spoken language in all its aspects and first/second language acquisition and development. Of course, this does not mean that these topics were not felt to be important by either group. It was clear from the rich accounts of everyday practice

provided by all teachers that much classroom time is spent in practical activity devoted to elaborating pupils' ability to produce and evaluate long texts, and also that increasing importance is given in both English and Modern Languages to developing spoken language skills; both involve continuing discussion with pupils about their work, which must include metalinguistic feedback of rich and varied kinds. But somehow neither emerged as salient themes when teachers were asked to discuss in more general terms their own views on language and the kinds of explicit knowledge it is desirable for pupils to develop. Similarly, teachers' accounts of classroom practice gave insights into the implicit language learning theories to which they themselves adhere; it seems impossible that, in day-to-day classroom work, teachers are not regularly giving explicit advice to pupils accordingly on what constitutes, in their view, good language learning strategies. But again this area was not tapped in interview, despite repeated opportunities. On the evidence, it would seem that language teachers have not yet fully theorised these key aspects of their work or, at least, that they lack a technical language through which they can easily analyse and discuss them with their pupils (and with visiting researchers).

On the basis of the evidence presented here, it would seem that ordinary language teachers have a much more limited conscious commitment to the systematic development of their pupils' KAL than is envisaged in their different ways by either the Language Awareness movement or the Kingman report. Nonetheless, it is clear that consciousness-raising about aspects of language has some place in most language classrooms, though perhaps in differing degrees for different pupils. Just how this talk about language works out in practice and how it impinges on the developing models of language held by pupils cannot be known until documented through further studies involving the longitudinal observation of classroom interaction. But it seems likely that it will take more than the limited cascade training programme presently envisaged by DES in support of Kingman to 'normalise' on the Kingman model the variation in current teacher knowledge, beliefs and practice.

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